

Hamon

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Hamon

by [CalicoCat](#)

Summary

Hamon - the pattern on a blade that separates the hard cutting edge from the flexible body that supports it. The balance between hardness and flexibility is a signature of the swordsmith... but what will be the *hamon* of Satsuki Kiryuin?

Tupperware. A practical sort of kitchenware, reflected Satsuki as she dodged to the side. True, it was less delicate and refined than the porcelain dining set that had apparently been a gift from the Emperor Napoleon, but it had other, more useful, qualities... It was easy to clean, and resistant even to the fearsomely hot curries that were her sister's favorite. Airtight too: Mankanshoku's croquettes were always yielded up with the same quivering freshness as though just lifted from the pan. It was lightweight, unlikely to break, unlikely to damage other objects in a collision, and, though she was loathe to admit it, it had unexpected, subtle advantages too – the sound as the lids snapped shut was strangely satisfying, and Satsuki often found herself sealing and resealing containers, luxuriating in the gentle pop as she did so. She ducked briefly, and a lid sailed over her, clattering to a spinning halt on the stone tiles that led to the entrance hall.

Her sister had the kitchen cupboards open, and was flinging objects at her. Ryuko was furious, but it wasn't the completely uncontrolled fury that Satsuki had seen before – though her rage was far from spent, it was still coated by a thin stratum of care. Ryuko grabbed a bulky enamel roasting dish from the shelves, weighed it for a moment, and then swapped it for a plastic sandwich box which she launched with slightly-more-than-human speed at her older sister.

“Damn it, Kiryuin! Why'd you have to be so... so... square!”

A sequence of three bowls in ascending sizes followed in a volley, but Ryuko was further infuriated by the easy grace with which Satsuki caught them and stacked them neatly beside her.

“Seventeen years!”

Measuring jug. Spatula. Cake tin.

“Seventeen years it's taken me to get some real friends! And now you won't even let me have a party!”

It was a point of principle. Satsuki wasn't trying to be awkward, or uncaring, merely... correct. Correct as she always tried to be.

“You're still seventeen, Ryuko.”

“And...?”

“For the moment you're still my responsibility.”

It had seemed a good idea at the time, that Satsuki would become Ryuko's legal guardian. The Mankanshokus had been equally willing, but that willingness had evaporated in embarrassed coughing and mumbled excuses when Barazo had discovered that a thorough background check would be a requirement. Better not to upset the apple cart when his back-street clinic was veering dangerously close to respectability and even profitability.

In the eyes of the law Satsuki herself was not yet strictly an adult, but it had taken only the slightest legal sleight of hand and a gentle flexing of the Kiryuin Conglomerate's financial muscle to overcome that particular obstacle and have Ryuko signed into the care of the Kiryuin family as a whole, if not to her sister specifically. After all, Lady Ragyo was still "unaccounted for" rather than "deceased" and that fact, in itself, lent a certain poignancy to the arrangement that drew approving remarks from the civic officials. *Thinking of the welfare of others in this time of your own loss... How considerate, Lady Satsuki. What an example to our other citizens.*

Then, however, the school officials appeared. They were less sentimental, bearing Ryuko's academic record like an abyssal testament: page after page of luminous indictment where particularly infamous incidents had been highlighted. Insubordination. Truancy. And fighting, and fighting, and fighting. Did Satsuki know whom she was taking responsibility for? She did. Would she see to it that no further involvement of the police would be required? She would. Was she sure that she wouldn't rather give her *largesse* to some more worthy, some more academically gifted, orphan? She was. And why was it that the noble Lady Satsuki Kiryuin would take it upon herself to improve the lot of that fearsomely troublesome delinquent, Ryuko Matoi? *Because everyone deserved a second chance*, replied Satsuki, though she declined to expand on who the recipient of that second chance was to be.

"Even Dad let me do what I wanted!"

Ryuko was running low on ammunition, and resorted to her ultimate attack – her fighter's instincts telling her the invocation of that name was the surest way to wound her sister. She was right of course, Satsuki realized; her father had always seemed to effortlessly negotiate the boundary between firmness and affection, but despite all his other gifts it seemed to be a skill he'd been unable to pass on to her. Even the strange parody of him that was all Ryuko had known had seemingly made a lasting impression, in spite of her claims of indifference and neglect.

"Ryuko..."

But her sister was already moving, pushing her body to just that fragment of extra speed beyond human, pushing herself so that when Satsuki reached out to place a hand on her shoulder her fingers passed through unfeeling air. The kitchen door was open now, Ryuko turning back for a moment to deliver a finishing blow:

"You're a lousy mother!"

And then she was out in the grounds, crouching on the flagstones of the patio before exploding up and away, the shockwave of her departure rattling the kitchen window frames and ruffling Satsuki's hair like careless, clumsy fingers.

These arguments with her sister were not like *kata*, something that could be practiced over and over until the perfect resolution were found. Even a single iteration was exhausting, making Satsuki feel that the core of her being had been burnt out, leaving only crumbling charcoal for a heart. A single accusing glance from Ryuko was more piercing than a broken limb; in turn she suspected that her occasional words of criticism were equally painful for her sister.

She flicked somberly through the pages of the book on the table – “Practical Parenting”. There was a whole chapter on building a relationship with your teenage daughter, but nothing about what you did when your teenage daughter was actually your sister. It was all about setting boundaries, apparently, but the mere concept of them was an affront to Ryuko. A boundary could be as much for protection as it could be for restraint, but either through her stubbornness, or her anger, Ryuko smashed them down wherever she found them, leaving jagged shards that cut Satsuki to ribbons whenever she reached out to her.

Ryuko’s school bag rested against the table leg where she’d left it behind, the plain leather messenger bag stuffed for a change with notebooks and textbooks: vague indications that she was beginning to apply herself to her studies. Satsuki would leave it in the entrance hall, somewhere where Ryuko could collect it without having to speak to her, just in case the volcano of resentment was still seething and ready to erupt.

She lifted the bag to her face momentarily and breathed in deeply; the familiar smell of leather intermingled with the scent of bento lunches and the cheap, nameless deodorant that Ryuko always seemed to gravitate towards. If she closed her eyes it was almost as though her sister was in the room with her again. She hugged it tight to her chest, imagining she was wrapping her arms around Ryuko’s rebellious shoulders. *Forgive me. I’m sorry. Let’s not fight. Haven’t we fought enough already?*

Why did she find herself unable to back down when she argued with Ryuko? Why was it so ingrained in her never to surrender, even about the most trivial, meaningless things? Why did she still favor self-destruction over submission?

She walked to the kitchen door, and looked westwards, out over the grounds. A black dot was moving in the far distance, but the dull voice of rationality told her it was likely a bird and not a young woman defying the laws of physics.

“Ryuko – come back.”

The wind carried her words towards Kanagawa, but its turbulence scattered them into broken syllables long before they reached her sister.

流れ星

Nagareboshi

Nagareboshi was too hard, and though the edge was keen enough that it might split a single syllable, when it clashed with a blade of equal strength it shattered and drove fragments of itself back at its wielder.

A thousand glass eyes stared at the two young women as they sat on the edge of the bed. There had been some brief expectation that the décor might have changed in the time since her last childhood visit, but when Satsuki had accepted the invitation to see Nonon's room she was greeted by the same orchestra of plushes and soft toys that she'd once seen those many years ago. The first violinist might have changed in the interim, but if anything a new string section had been added.

She picked up a Totoro from near the pillow and stroked the fur between its ears.

"You kept this, I see."

Nonon giggled, the sound having a light musicality all its own.

"Of course! And all the other ones you gave me on my birthdays."

Satsuki placed it back between the other Totoros, maintaining the perfect progression of sizes.

"Once you told me you liked that film, it did rather set a pattern for the gifts I gave you."

"They're the most precious things I own, Satsuki."

There were a lot of Totoros. There was a lot of pink, too, in the room. Looking around, Satsuki concluded that was the triplet of interior design: musical motifs, pink, and soft toys. But though the faces were welcoming, the unblinking eyes seemed expectant, judgmental, and she felt the need to fill the lull in conversation.

"So."

"So."

It was a small movement at first, just the placing of Nonon's hand on her thigh at the boundary where the skirt met her tights, and Satsuki turned slightly, finding a face lifted up to her.

"Satsuki..."

She somehow heard her name, crystal-clear in an exhaled breath. And a moment later she felt lips press against hers, as Nonon continued to rise, seemingly desperate to overcome the height difference between the two of them.

Cherry blossoms. Whatever it was that Nonon used to color her hair, it had the unmistakable scent of cherry blossoms. Satsuki breathed in deeply, savoring the gentle associations with spring, and as she opened her mouth to breathe out she felt Nonon's tongue dance on her lips, then press gently forward until its tip touched her own. That initial touch was so soft, so fleeting, that it put her in mind of trying to catch snowflakes, one winter on the mountainous slopes of Hakone. That had been Nonon's idea too, she realized – was it conceivable that it had been a prelude to this moment? It would have been uncharacteristically far-sighted, but perhaps it was no different to the exposition of a theme that would rise to a climax in the final

movement of a symphony. And that was a progression that Nonon knew instinctively; of that Satsuki was certain.

She allowed her hand to rise, and her fingers to move through Nonon's short pink hair, gently skirting the curve of her ear. It was strangely soft, not at all like her own which still seemed to cry out to be returned to its childhood length, and a world away from Ryuko's scruffy locks, those times she'd tried in vain to shape them with her fingers into some semblance of order.

Nonon's fingertips traced two delicate traces down her neck, meeting at the first button of her shirt. As it came undone, Satsuki felt the pressure of Nonon's lips turn for a moment into a distinct kiss, one that was repeated as each further button opened, and she began count off the little separations.

Six buttons, the first already undone. As the second and third opened there was an instant that she felt Nonon's fingers brush the skin of her breasts, above the cotton of her underwear. Then the fourth and fifth, and with them she felt a chill across her stomach as the fabric came away, and the sixth and final fastening – as it released, Nonon's fingers ran over her belly and stopped for a moment on her hips. Then they moved up her sides, over her ribs, before cupping her breasts – thumbs moving in languid arcs over where Nonon could just feel the gentle mounds of her nipples, pressed down by plain white fabric.

It wasn't... It wasn't unpleasant. The sensation of gentle hands on her body. The motion of another's tongue against hers. To hear someone else's breath louder and clearer than her own. Satsuki could feel treacherous memories swirling far beneath the surface, but that leviathan moved in the dark waters fathoms down and she was safe as long as she only swept her fingers through the azure of the shallows.

Nonon's movements became more insistent – one leg hitched up over Satsuki's, her skirt riding up as she rubbed herself along Satsuki's thigh. The fingers halted their caresses and arced around, tickling her armpits for a moment before they met again behind her, tensioning the clasp of her bra, ready to release it.

And then they stopped.

The kiss had been the resolution of more than a decade of longing, but Nonon still somehow summoned the resolve to pull back and look deep into Satsuki's eyes. And in the deep blue she saw an uncomfortable truth - Satsuki wasn't upset, or angry, but she wasn't aroused either; she was just... serene.

"You're not enjoying this, are you?"

It would only have been a one word response, but Satsuki found it impossible to speak.

Nonon sat back down on the bed, drawing her hands to her waist.

"If you're not enjoying it, why don't you say so? Why don't you let me know?"

Rebellion against her mother, the prospect of certain death, both seemed preferable beyond preferable, in comparison to simply speaking the impending, looming truth. Satsuki bowed her head, as much an apology as trying to avoid looking into Nonon's eyes.

"I thought... I thought it was what you'd been waiting for all these years."

Rage sparked in Nonon in a way that Satsuki had only previously seen directed at their shared adversaries.

"YOU DON'T HAVE TO DO IT JUST BECAUSE I WANT TO! IT MATTERS WHAT YOU WANT TOO, SATSUKI!!"

Satsuki opened her mouth to speak again, and then closed it. All her words had left her: her studies of philosophy and great literature rendered inarticulate and mute by the fury of her closest friend.

They sat together on the bed, neither looking at the other, until the light began to fade, and in the whispering dark the toys cast the hostile shadows of hunting creatures in the wild woods.

交響詩

Koukyoushi

Koukyoushi was too flexible, and though the resilience it carried within itself was such that it might never be broken, it flexed too far when the attack was pressed, and would not protect its mistress.

Sometimes it was useful to pull rank. She'd sworn that she'd never do it, she'd never abuse the trust that The Four had placed in her, but sometimes it was the simplest, most direct way to a conclusion. Easier to simply call Uzu and demand to know how much Ryuko had drunk, rather than try to decipher the retching coming from her bathroom. Easier this time, too, to make a statement rather than a request.

"I'm borrowing Mankanshoku."

Of all of them, Gamagoori was the most likely to accede to her demands without comment, and that made Satsuki feel a little stab of guilt as he barked his response with the resonant authority of a drill sergeant.

"She will be at your disposal, Lady Satsuki!"

"I mentioned it before, but 'Satsuki' will be quite sufficient from now on."

"Ira Gamagoori will endeavor to remember, Lady Satsuki!"

The urge to face-palm was near irresistible, and Satsuki winced at the subtle way in which Ryuko had snuck strange new patterns of behavior into her life – *memes* she called them, though Satsuki was unsure whether Professor Dawkins would recognize anything of his theories in their execution. “The Selfish LOLcat” had yet to be submitted for peer review, she imagined.

She kicked the 2000GT down a gear and urged it through the traffic with an impatience that her sister would have found thoroughly uncharacteristic. A Tokyo PD car had pulled in behind her a kilometer or two back, lights flashing, but had backed off respectfully when the driver had registered the Kiryuin Conglomerate corporate plates, and there had been little challenge in leaving it far behind as Satsuki weaved in and out of the heavy flow of cars.

“I’ll be with you in thirty minutes.”

A space was opening in the traffic ahead of her, and she accelerated hard, slotting into place with a precision that left the drivers behind her stamping on the brakes, trails of red behind her like luminescent calligraphy.

The benches were damp with the afternoon’s showers, green with lichen or simple life of some other kind, but a Kiryuin always came prepared, and Satsuki spread out a tartan blanket from the car to sit on.

The observation point had been constructed on a bluff between the Chichibu conifers, giving a perfect view of the forests of the valley and Fuji-san in the distance. The clear air here gave clarity to thought, and the rolling waves of greens that burst into red in autumn, before withering to brown in winter, were never less than calming.

This was their little fortress, the place Satsuki would come with Mako when she needed an entirely different, and entirely optimistic, outlook on life. She’d made her swear that she’d never reveal its existence to either Ryuko or Nonon, but it had been an oath she was sure would be broken. Satsuki had readied armfuls of forgiveness, imagining some clumsy, enthusiastic slip of the tongue, the kind that Mako seemed to make at least once in every conversation, would disclose its whereabouts. She was ready to forgive, but forgiveness proved unnecessary; her sister and her friend remained as steadfastly ignorant of the little clearing with its wooden benches and tables, as they did of the steep pathways that led to it. Mako was a better confidant than many gave her credit for.

“What do you know of swordsmithing, Mako?”

Satsuki continued before the woman beside her had a chance to respond.

“The Kiryuins have made their own swords for hundreds of years, back to the Kamakura period, if not earlier.” She leant back against the picnic table and looked wistfully out over the valley. “Father made Bakuzan drawing on the knowledge of my ancestors, the Rending Scissors too – though I doubt traditionalists would have been happy with their design.”

“Ryuko-chan told me about sword-making! I think she only knows about it from manga, though.”

“Hmmp. I don’t doubt it.”

“I saw a documentary! The metal has to be folded over and over – it sounds like really hard work! Even thinking about it makes me hungry!”

As usual, complex exposition was augmented with vigorous gesturing. For a moment the observation platform faded from view, replaced by the heat and sweat of the forge as Mako repeated the actions of a master swordsmith. The theatre was as captivating as always, and brought a thoughtful smile to Satsuki’s face.

“Unfortunately it seems I lack the skill to make a good sword.”

Too hard... Too flexible... I shatter or I bend, and do little but hurt myself and those closest to me. How was it I could draw us all together and find unity in the most desperate of times, and now when life should be simple, the most pressing question whether to rise at six or six-thirty, I only seem to drive us apart?

“I’m sure you’d make a wonderful sword, Lady Satsuki!”

She felt the faith misplaced, but Satsuki was grateful for it nonetheless; she closed her eyes, and thought of the smelting, the folding, and the shaping of that *hamon* that gave the blade identity.

“Lady Satsuki knows all the techniques of swordsmithing, I’m sure! But perhaps you’re missing an ingredient?”

Satsuki kept her eyes closed and listened to the soothing flow of Mako’s voice.

“And what might that be, Mako?”

“Perhaps you just need to add patience.”

Satsuki opened her eyes, and looked across at her companion, furrowing her brow at the expression of earnest simplicity she found there.

One day someone will catch you out and reveal you to be not so simple as everyone thinks. But it won’t be me.

“Well said, ‘Mako Masamune’. You know of Masamune, I imagine.”

Mako bobbed enthusiastically.

“Of course, Lady Satsuki! He’s one of Ryuko-chan’s favorite manga-ka! She thinks Major Kusanagi’s ever so pretty! She’s always saying how she’d like to poke some digits in her interfaces!”

Maybe it was a chilling gust of wind, or perhaps it was something else, but there was a sudden flush of red on Satsuki's cheeks.

I find myself glad that we fought side-by-side... You would be a terrifying opponent, Mako Mankanshoku, with that unerring ability of yours to pinpoint one's greatest weakness.

Three unplayed messages.

First unplayed message.

"Satsuki, pick up the phone. Pick up the phone, Sis. I know I can be a little shit. It's in the contract for kid sisters. Pick up the phone. Don't be a grouch. Sis. Sis Sis Sis Sis. Siiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiis. C'mon. Onee-sama. Onee-sama-sama. Oneeeeeeee-samaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa. Onee-sa..."

End of message.

Second unplayed message.

"..."

"... It's Nonon, Satsuki."

"I'm sorry I shouted. I know some things don't come easily, even to the Steel Queen. I know there are things that make you uncomfortable. And I know you're not ready to talk about them."

"I... There's a concert coming up... The Royal Concertgebouw are playing Mahler Five at the Tokyo International Forum. Would you like to go?"

"We don't have to do anything else. I'd just like to hold hands if that's okay with you."

"..."

"Anyway... Let me know. Don't worry about the tickets. Someone will want them if we don't go."

End of message.

Third unplayed message.

"Hey Sis. It's me. I've got Troll Doll here."

"DON'T CALL ME THAT."

"Looks like you're pissed at us both, so we wrote you a song. OK... I wrote the lyrics, Mini Mozart massacred the tune, so I'm gonna do the honors with my mouth, and she's gonna do

the finger stuff. On my guitar.”

“Do you have to make it sound so... anatomical, slacker?”

“Wow, Little Liszt is total prude... did you grab her from some shrine or somethin’?”

“I am not a...”

“OK! Here we go! 1-2-3-4!”

*Satsuki Kiryuin,
She's the Steel Queen.
Always does her duty,
And she's got a great personality.
To enemies she never submits,
And what a pair of eyebrows.
Anyway we both love her,
More than any other.*

“Those weren't the lyrics we agreed on!!”

“Hey, give us a call! Well, don't give Napoleon a call, give me a call. But call, OK?”

“I just want to say that none of this was my id...”

“Oh, by the way, Baby Beethoven and I are gettin' hitched, so I'm gonna need you to give me away. See ya!”

“WE ARE NOT GETTING MAR...”

End of message.

No more unplayed messages.

“Hey, Ryuko here. Just a sec', can't hear you over the awesome riffs of Linkin Park... Let me turn it down... Hah! Bet you thought I was in! Fooled ya! If you're not hot or rich don't bother leavin' a message. Unless it's Uzu, in which case, where the hell's my box set of 'Otokogumi'?? If I don't get it back soon I'm gonna kick your scrawny ass to Hokkaido!”

“Ryuko, it is I, your sister. After due consideration I have decided to permit your proposed event to go ahead in the mansion. However, there are a number of conditions attached.”

“First: you will meet the cost of repairs for any damage caused by you or your compatriots from your allowance. This includes the drawing of 'humorous', and I use the term loosely, facial hair on any of the portraits of our ancestors.”

“The library, archives and armory are to remain off-limits. Any attempt to enter them will be met with my *extreme* displeasure.”

“I shall attend, in order to ensure the good behavior of all present.”

“Finally: You will permit me to bring a guest of my own choosing.”

“Should you agree to these conditions, then your party may proceed with my blessing.”

A single trail of fizzing luminance, a moment’s anticipation, and then the drooping boughs of the willow, painted on the black sky in reds, blues and golds. The thunder of the detonation rolled over the estate, roars of the crowd signaling their approval for a moment, before the next wave of the aerial assault was launched.

“Your sister’s shotgunning Asahi on top of the ornamental fountain.”

“It would be a fool that challenges her, if she remembers to use the life fibers to neutralize the alcohol.”

“But they don’t know that, do they?”

Satsuki smiled and settled back in the couch, allowing Nonon to snuggle against her.

“Then that will be a valuable lesson for them.”

She’d been the dutiful *onee-sama* that evening, not to Ryuko this time, surprisingly, but to a few of the other guests who didn’t have the benefit of a history of partying or alien parasites to harden their drinking skills. And the rite of passage that so many had spoken of had finally been completed: she’d held one girl’s hair back as she’d heaved over the toilet, moaning a largely one-sided conversation that Satsuki had struggled to contribute to.

“How do I get Matoi to notice me? I only tried to steal that stupid *seifuku* off her. Do you think she’ll forgive me?”

Satsuki paused for a moment in contemplation.

“I think she’s forgiven far worse.”

Glasses – which on several occasions had been dangerously close to sliding into the bowl – short brown hair, the girl had been strangely familiar. But she’d made a mistake if she thought she’d impress Ryuko with how fast she could sink shots.

“My advice would be: try being aloof and imperious.”

The girl had been unsteadily hopeful as she’d wobbled back towards the gardens.

“Will that work?”

“There is some evidence that it has been successful in the past.”

From her vantage point in the drawing room, Satsuki could now see the girl striking an amusingly recognizable pose on top of the balustrades of the patio, slurring a shout of “Ryuko Matoi!” The cry went unheeded, but as she rocked unsteadily and begun to tumble forward, heading inexorably into the thorny embrace of the rose bushes, Ryuko leapt across the garden and swept her up, landing safely on the broad pathway that led through the gardens to cheers from the crowd.

Nonon tilted her head back, trying to gauge Satsuki’s expression, but without moving from her comfortable position nestling on her chest.

“She’s showing off again. Don’t you worry that someone will notice?”

“I doubt there will be many clear memories of the evening’s events.”

Moving between the pools of light on the patio, Ryuko was now slow-dancing with the bespectacled girl or, more accurately, dancing with herself and holding the girl up in some semi-comatose clinch. Realizing her sister was watching her through the open French windows, she gave a little shrug of “*what can you do?*” causing Satsuki to smile back at the unlikely couple.

“That song we played you – the lyrics were all Ryuko’s idea. I’d never have agreed if I’d known what she was going to say.”

Satsuki found an unexpected edge to her response.

“And why might I have taken offence at the lyrics?”

“Because... the rhymes...” Nonon tailed off into uncertainty. Looking back again, she struggled to decipher whether Satsuki was being honestly naïve, or enjoying a rare moment of humor at her expense.

“I’ve noticed that you sometimes forget to refer to Ryuko as ‘Matoi’ or ‘slacker’.”

“It doesn’t mean anything! I’m just trying to be considerate because she’s your sister.”

“Of course.”

“I wouldn’t do it for anyone else.”

Satsuki leaned in a little closer.

“So you wouldn’t be trying to set two loving sisters against each other to battle for your affections, would you now, Lady Jakuzure?”

Nonon squirmed as she sought a response, and then, hoping that a moment of intimacy would derail the conversation, ran her fingers softly up the side of Satsuki’s thigh. But rather than stiffen in surprise, Satuski instead tightened her embrace and let a hand move gently to one breast.

“You might think me inexperienced in such matters,” Satsuki whispered, “But you should remember that I have always been a fearsomely quick study.”

She brought her other hand up to Nonon’s cheek and savored the warmth as the blush spread. *Both sharp and flexible* – it was the response she’d been looking for. Mentally she sheathed the sword with a flourish; so this was to be the *hamon* of Satsuki Kiryuin.

For a moment she was certain that her father would have been happy with the quality of the blade she’d made.

真心

Makokoro

Makokoro was forged with a perfect notare hamon: gentle undulating waves that resembled the swell of a Hokusai ukiyo-e. Like the sea, it absorbed every blow and remained unchanging. Like the sea, the ferocity of its assault could not be blunted.

*Rather than that I should remain at home,
Longing for you,
I would be the sword that you wear
And pray the gods to keep you from harm.*

— By the father of Kusakabe Minaka, *Manyōshū*

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